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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENTIANE 000311

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [KIRF](#) [LA](#)

SUBJECT: CHRISTIANITY IN THE LAO CONTEXT

REF: A. 05 VIENTIANE 1302

[1](#)B. 05 VIENTIANE 710

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. In a late February visit, DRL/IRF analyst Dr. Clarissa Adamson met with religious leaders and government officials to press for greater religious freedom and the release of four religious prisoners. Noting the slow pace of progress in Laos, Bishop Khamse of Vientiane,s Catholic Diocese reported the GoL has still not authorized the Church to conduct its first ordination of a priest since [1](#)1975. The United Methodists are again seeking official and separate recognition by the GoL, but suspect the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) may be blocking their request. Some sources allege that LEC head Khamphone may be using church funds to influence the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) and to prevent the recognition of other Protestant denominations. According to recent reports, a local official in Oudomsay Province has confiscated the land of eight Christian families in Ban Nam Heang Village. End Summary.

Catholics: Things Move Slowly in Laos

[1](#)2. (C) In a February 27 meeting, Catholic Bishop Khamse described to Dr. Adamson and the Ambassador the situation of Laos' Catholics. There are approximately 41,000 Catholics in Laos. The Vientiane Diocese includes around 11,000 members, and the congregation of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Vientiane numbers roughly 2,000. Bishop Khamse heads the Vientiane Diocese. Luang Prabang is a separate Diocese, with membership slightly higher than that of Vientiane. There is a Catholic church in Luang Prabang, but the provincial government will not allow it to open, and the building has been occupied by police since 1975. The Catholics also have a church in Pakse in southern Laos, which Khamse said was watched very closely by local officials, who forbid the community to engage in some religious activities. The Bishop said the church in Thakhek, the principal church of Khammouane province's 12,000 Catholics, had few problems with local authorities.

[1](#)3. (C) Bishop Khamse noted that the GoL is afraid that government opposition may develop within religious groups, and for that reason the Catholic Church must be patient and not push the government. He described the Catholics as being locked up their own world. Despite 120 years in Laos, the Bishop said, there has been little progress in the situation of the country's Catholics. They have no schools, no healthcare facilities, and some land and buildings that used to be the property of the Church have been seized by the government.

14. (C) In regard to the cancelled ordination in late 2005, the Bishop said "we are Lao, things move slowly." He shared his view that the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) understood the need for the ordination to go forward, noting that the central problem was with officials in Bolikhamsay Province, whom the Bishop said "seem to fear we are doing something that will destroy them." The Bishop consistently mentioned the split between the central and provincial level governments and the fact that policies dictated by the central government are often not understood or enforced in the provinces. The LFNC has given no indication regarding when or if the ordination will be allowed to proceed.

Wielding Influence

15. (C) Having had their application to register with the LFNC as an official religion rejected in 2004, the Methodists approached the government in early 2006 with a renewed request to register. Pastor Sengdeuane of the United Methodists told Dr. Adamson that while the LFNC has not yet approved the Methodist's registration request, he believes most of their difficulties originate from the LEC and not the government. He said the LEC has close relations with and influences the LFNC. Sangdeuane went on to say that when he was an LEC member he witnessed the transfer of "gifts" from LEC head Khamphone to the LFNC, alleging that Khamphone has helped LFNC officials build homes, purchase cars, and fund travel. Pastor Polo, an LEC Pastor in Vientiane and ethnic Khmu (closely protect), said that much of the money flowing into the LEC headquarters comes not only from LEC church donations, but also from religious groups in the US, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.

16. (C) During a meeting with Sayduam Moua, the ethnic Hmong
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Pastor of an LEC Church at Phuokhao Khouay Village north of Vientiane, the pastor told Dr. Adamson and PolOff that LEC head Khamphone "hates the Hmong," who, along with the Khmu, make up the bulk of LEC members. The pastor, who was also the LFNC representative for the village, said his church has had no problems with the government or the local village chief, an animist whose son has converted to Christianity and attends the church. The church, which was built in 2005, has a congregation of roughly 200. The pastor said the LEC headquarters has provided a few Bibles and hymnals, but no other support. When asked about the Methodists attempts to be officially recognized, he commented that people should only believe in religions that are approved by the government.

LEC Looking to China: A Plan to Increase Authority?

17. (C) During a meeting with Dr. Adamson, LEC Pastor Khamphone, waving a copy of the Chinese policy on religious freedom, expressed his desire for the GoL to adopt religious policies similar to those of China. He noted that he had organized a trip to China last year that included representatives from the LFNC and the Ministry of Information and Culture (Ref A). Although Khamphone held China up as a model of religious tolerance for the GoL to follow, Pastor Polo told PolOff that while China's religious policy may be an improvement over that of Laos, he suspects that Khamphone likes China's policy because it would give greater authority to the LEC as the primary GoL recognized Protestant organization.

Religious Prisoners and the LFNC,s Perspective

18. (C) In a February 27 meeting with Khamphuey of the LFNC, Dr. Adamson pressed the GoL to consider the release of religious prisoners in Laos, specifically mentioning the four prisoners cited in the 2005 International Religious Freedom Report on Laos, all of whom were LEC members. Denying that there were any religious prisoners in Laos and saying that they must be imprisoned for other reasons, Khamphuey asked

that the Embassy send a diplomatic note with their names so the matter could be investigated. Embassy Vientiane has since sent a diplomatic note requesting reconsideration of the cases and is awaiting a response.

¶9. (C) Having just come from a meeting with the head of the United Methodists, and knowing that they recently requested GoL approval (again) to organize in Laos (Ref A), Dr. Adamson asked that the Methodists be recognized and allowed to organize and congregate freely. Khamphuey did not respond directly to this request, but noted that this was primarily an issue of division within one religious group - the LEC - under which he groups most Protestants. He also noted that "some people are trying to use religion for negative purposes" and that "some religions do not fit Laos, situation," going on to say the GoL must protect Lao people from religious groups that do not teach "accurately."

Land Confiscation

¶10. (C) In response to reports from a religious organization that ethnic Khmu Christians in Oudomsay Province, Nam Heang Village have been threatened with land confiscation, the Embassy requested the LFNC looked into the matter. During a March 22 meeting about the reports, LEC Pastor Polo reported that eight of the fourteen Khmu Christian families in the village already had their lands confiscated by the local village chief in February. He noted that the families had paid their taxes and had their documentation in order. The village chief is an Animist and has reportedly given the land to other Animist villagers. All those that were subject to land confiscation held land plots that bordered each other. The six Christian families that have not suffered land confiscation farmed lands in another area. The current village chief is apparently the same village chief who tried to expel Christians a couple years ago.

Comment

¶11. (C) While they are unhappy with both the actions and inaction of the GoL, the Methodists believe that the LEC's back-stage obstruction is the real reason for their difficulties gaining official recognition. That is not to let the GoL off the hook. Even the Catholics, who are recognized by the GoL and have been present in Laos for over a century, believe that they have not been treated fairly by the GoL. The Catholic leadership attributes their problems to provincial and district level governments who have a poor

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understanding of law and policy. The LFNC often cites incomplete dissemination of laws as a reason why local officials sometimes get out of hand. Although we agree that district and provincial level officials sometimes take actions that are not supported by the central government, we also believe that this provides a convenient cover story when the GoL wants to dodge responsibility or ignore unsavory actions that they condone; the GoL is very capable of disseminating and enforcing its policies in even the remotest areas when it wants.

¶12. (C) Post will continue to follow up on the confiscation of Christian lands in Oudomsay Province. End comment.
HASLACH